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## From Peru With Love

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Alpacas in the Peruvian Andes stay warm thanks to their fluffy fleece, which is shorn each summer.

*By Austin Bailey, World Ark senior editor*

*Photos by Lily Piel*

**Alpaca Farmers and Artisans in the Andes join the global marketplace to share their unique gifts with the rest of the world and to make their lives in the mountains a little bit easier.**

MARCAPATA, Peru — Should you ever visit Julia Monroy Rojas of Lacco, Peru, the journey will be grueling, but worth your while. Monroy lives high in the Altiplano, on a rocky band that sits below the snowcaps but far above the tree line. The region is vast but not lonely; herds of llamas and alpacas cling to the brittle mountainsides, and sheep and horses stubbornly clog dirt roads. A sparse but steady stream of foot traffic connects the high communities with the district seat of Marcapata, nearly 3,000 feet below.

All paved roads in these parts end at the town of Marcapata, a few mountains away from Monroy's perch. She can tackle the steep and winding climb from town back home in four hours or so, despite her flimsy sandals and a fully-packed qeperina sack slung over her shoulders. But flatlanders unaccustomed to rigorous hiking in thin air shouldn't try to keep up. Monroy's house sits up a bit higher than 14,000 feet, nearly three times as high as Denver, the Mile High City. So unless you tackled Mount Everest recently, you'll need a truck, a fearless driver and quite possibly an oxygen tank. The equator is only a dozen degrees away, but the altitude in Lacco demands warm sweaters and above-average lung capacity.

Monroy has those things, but not much else. Broad-chested and under five feet tall, her strong but slight build that's ubiquitous among indigenous Andean peoples is ideal on steep slopes. And her growing flocks of alpaca and sheep allow her to keep her family bundled in thick blankets and clothing made from wool she sheared, spun, and weaved or knit herself.

Like the other members of Tres Alpaquitas, a cooperative of alpaca farmers and artisans in the Marcapata district, Monroy learned to knit and weave in the distinctive Andean style from parents and neighbors. These skills, combined with the know-how to cultivate potatoes and other high-altitude crops, have helped families eke out a bare-bones existence in the remote Peruvian highlands for centuries.



Julia Monroy Rojas displays handwoven blankets at the local fair.

Today, though, life on the mountain is changing. The Interoceanic Highway, a ribbon of blacktop that rolls from the Peruvian coast through the Brazilian Amazon, was finished in 2011. A section of it slithers through the Marcapata

District, beckoning the outside world closer and bearing hints of easier, more comfortable lives lived elsewhere. Like many of the young people raised in high Andean communities, Monroy's four oldest children left home in search of education and jobs. They wanted money, Monroy said. And on the mountain, there is none.

"They told me, 'We don't want to stay here and eat alpaca bones,'" she said.

So as manpower trickles out of these communities on the backs of young people, and as climate change makes raising crops and animals on the mountains even more challenging, Heifer is stepping in to help with intensive values-based training that builds community unity. By increasing the size and quality of alpaca herds, providing improved equipment to process alpaca fiber and connecting uniquely talented Peruvian artisans to strong markets for their products,

Heifer aims to help highland communities stoke the economic momentum they need to not just survive, but live well.

## A DAY'S WORK

For people living without electricity and other modern conveniences, schedules are dictated largely by weather and the sun. Monroy is usually the first to wake at her house, a thatch-roofed rock and mud structure about a half-hour climb from the village proper. She rises at 4 a.m. each day, not really so early considering the pitch darkness chases her to bed by 7 p.m. most nights.

Some of Monroy's days are devoted to tending her potato patch, others to cooking and weaving. Her son Alberto, not yet 3, toddles along to help tend the family's nine laying hens, gifts from Heifer International. Once a week or so she hikes out to harvest trout from a pond stocked with fingerlings from Heifer. The chicken eggs and trout significantly improve the family's diet, which was limited before largely to potatoes and an occasional meal of alpaca meat. As their fortunes improved, the family built a greenhouse so they can eat and sell fresh vegetables.



A boy herds alpacas and llamas during the annual fiber festival in Lacco, Peru. Caring for the herds is a family affair.

“Before we had the trout and chickens it was definitely harder,” she said in Quechua, an indigenous language that’s still the most prominent tongue in highland communities.

The most promising benefit from Heifer, however, is still in the works. In 2011, Heifer started a project to help 4,333 alpaca-raising families throughout the Peruvian Andes. In the districts of Marcapata, Ocongate and Pitumarca, Heifer aims to improve the alpaca gene pool to produce softer, finer fiber of consistent color that has the potential to command significantly higher prices. Heifer is also supporting the artisan group Tres Alpaquitas and others with equipment and training so they can improve the yarn and handicrafts they produce and get them out to buyers who will pay good prices.

Building this new income source is particularly important as life in the Andes becomes less predictable, said Oscar Aragon, head of Heifer Peru’s Cusco office. “We’re struggling with how to face climate change,” he said. “It’s causing lack of water in the mountains, desertification, higher temperatures in the summer, lower temperatures that kill animals in the winter. In the last year there was not enough rain, and cold snaps were more frequent.”

Heavy rains fell during harvest season, an anomaly that caused potato crops to rot, he said. While many people are leaving the highlands to look for work in the city, Aragon hopes to help those who stay find ways to cope. Andean people offer skills and goods no one else can, and those unique resources, especially the alpaca, will be the crux of development in the region. “They can feel proud because it’s a resource to the world that is so big and precious,” Aragon said.

## HIGH TECH

The women artisans Heifer partners with in the Peruvian Andes need more than looms and knitting needles to get their work out to the rest of the world. Cameras, computers and a good Internet connection are proving to be equally as important.

Heifer provides training and equipment to help women’s groups improve how they market their goods. Artisans can promote their work online and also surf the web to pick up new techniques and designs. Two of the cooperatives, Tres Alpaquitas and Natural Pacha, have Facebook pages to showcase their work. Members of Tres Alpaquitas also post videos, photos, product information and artist bios to their website, [www.heifer.org/tresalpaquitas](http://www.heifer.org/tresalpaquitas) (<http://www.heifer.org/tresalpaquitas>). They hope to be able to sell their products online soon.

You can help the alpaca breeders and artisans in Peru make the most of their resources by buying their products or donating to Heifer International.



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Monroy devotes lots of time to caring for the dozens of alpacas that live in a large pen spreading up the slope behind her house. She gives all her animals names like Spot and Pink Ears, and she feeds them oats and other fodder to supplement what the alpacas munch when they roam free from 6 a.m. to around 4 p.m. each day.

All of that attention is starting to pay off. The youngest alpacas have better fleece after two seasons of strategic breeding and improved fodder, Monroy said, softer and not as thick. Aragon is far from satisfied though, and suspects it will take a few years to achieve the results he wants. Luckily, highland alpaca breeders are getting help from other places, too. The national and local governments are planning to fund a center for alpaca crafts and breeding to help Monroy and other artisans improve the fiber their animals yield at their annual shearings. The center will also help artisans polish their skills to better craft blankets, clothing and other woolens with the quality and appeal to sell overseas.

After serving a typical lunch of golf ball-sized, skin-on boiled potatoes piled high, Monroy put on an impromptu fashion show of the products she made on a loom fashioned from three sticks poked into the ground. With no electricity, no windows and only a tiny door, the interior of her house is dim even at midday. Still, the high-contrast patterns of her weavings stand out. Shy at first, Monroy gained confidence as she went along, eventually modeling a poncho made of brightly colored sheep's wool, tightly woven to be water resistant. "This would be good to go to a party in the rain," she said, practicing her already charming salesmanship.

Her charm goes on display again later in the day, as a judge inspects a selection of her handicrafts at the annual livestock festival in Lacco. Monroy shakes his hand and won't let go, dazzling him with small talk. A few minutes later, though, while demonstrating the seemingly magical skill of spinning yarn from fleece using only a handheld spindle, Monroy breaks her strand and has to repair it. "I am a bad woman," she says, deflated.

Part of Heifer's work in Lacco and other highland communities is to boost women's leadership skills and self-confidence to help them succeed in the marketplace. Extreme modesty handicaps women like Monroy, who seem genuinely unaware of their talents and contributions.

## **A HIVE OF INDUSTRY**





Artisans in Pitumarca, Peru, learn to use spinning machines to make more yarn, more quickly. Photo by Bryan Clifton.

Roxanne Gonzalez Mamani is dewy and out of breath when she trips into the workshop of Tres Alpaquitas a few minutes after 9 a.m. She left her home in the highland community of Huayllapata at 4 a.m. to make the now familiar commute. Gonzalez is a master at classifying alpaca fibers, and her expertise is in high demand. She makes the five-hour trek to the workshop on the outskirts of Marcapata twice a week.

The cramped but sunny room Tres Alpaquitas rents for workshop space is on the second floor of a building owned by the municipal government of Marcapata. Scales, spinning machines and other equipment bump against each other inside, but when the weather is good Gonzalez and the other artisans spill out to the cement courtyard. Gonzalez picks a shady corner to spread out a mountain of brown alpaca fiber and separate it by grade.

There are six different grades of alpaca fiber. The softest is “royal,” and it comes from the very first shearing of a baby alpaca. Alpaca graded “baby” is the next softest. With good breeding and care, even adult alpacas can produce fibers fine and soft enough to earn “baby” status. From there the grades become more coarse and scratchy. Soft fiber is best for clothes, while coarse fiber works well for blankets and rugs, Gonzalez explained.

Once separated by grade and hand-washed in large buckets, Tres Alpaquitas members consider the color. Often they choose to capitalize on alpacas' natural color variants to produce white, cream, brown, gray and black yarn. Other times, they use natural dyes to produce brightly colored yarn and felt. Berries from the indigo plant yield blue dye; insects called cochineal are used for red. Yellow dye comes from chilka, a flowering plant that grows wild in the region.

A carding machine is the next step, to brush the fibers in one direction and untangle it for spinning. Carding machines are expensive, so Tres Alpaquitas members pay to use one that belongs to someone else. They're saving money to buy their own, and hope to also be able to build their own workshop in which to house it. They hope someday to have more room to work and display their finished products. For now, Tres Alpaquitas members do much of their weaving and knitting at home. They use the workshop for meetings and to spin yarn or make the felted wool bags and jewelry that are their specialty. Workshop hours also provide the women a rare chance to leave their isolated homesteads and spend time together.

Helena Sanga Condemayta, a farmer and mother of four, practiced a lot before she mastered the spinning machines that line the walls of the workshop. "The machine is a great help. It's much faster and makes much better yarn," she said, demonstrating how quickly she can spin both fine threads and thicker ones. Sanga is happiest when she's working with Tres Alpaquitas, and hopes that sales will pick up enough that she can give up farming for full-time fiber work. "I want to do this, I want to work and improve and be able to sell," she said.

## **MOUNTAINS LEFT TO CLIMB**



Julia Monroy Rojas tests the strength of a thread she spun from an alpaca fleece from her own herd.

The members of Tres Alpaquitas know they have some obstacles to tackle to make their business successful.

Only one of the women speaks Spanish in addition to the local Quechua, so communicating with people from outside the Andes region is difficult. It's challenging, living in an isolated region, to know what styles will sell in larger cities and overseas. Sometimes buyers reject their products, and they don't know what to do differently to make them more marketable.

A tiny shop Tres Alpaquitas runs in Marcapata's town square gets little foot traffic, and sales to this point have been slow, Amanda Guerra Macedo said.

"I'm frustrated because I have made these things and haven't sold them," she said, pulling a heap of knitted hats from a bag. Patterned with cables and bobbles, the hats are soft and all one of a kind. Many of the women in the cooperative can't read, and the patterns aren't written down anywhere, anyway, so every piece is unique. How do the women end up with symmetrical designs and a good fit with no charts or measurements to go by? "I just look at it and I do it," Guerra explained with a shrug.

Eufemia Esperilla Leon, a 29-year-old mother one and president of Tres Alpaquitas, said she's confident the group will eventually work out the kinks and succeed. Because Internet access is extremely spotty in Marcapata, Esperilla travels to Cusco at least once a month to check email and update the website and Facebook page for Tres Alpaquitas. She and other members traveled to Lima for Peru Moda, the country's annual fashion exhibit, and plan to go again each year. In five years or so they may even take to the catwalk to put on a show of their own.

Sales will pick up soon because the women of Tres Alpaquitas are eager to put in the hours and sweat it takes to succeed, Esperilla said. The quality of fiber and workmanship continues to improve as cooperative members improve the care and breeding of their animals and come to trainings to polish their needlework skills. Importers from France, England, Switzerland and the United States are showing interest in selling their work, which is giving the artisans a shot of hope, confidence and renewed determination. The only piece missing is the point of sale.

"We will go forward because I will go everywhere," Esperilla said. "Whatever the association needs, I do."

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